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ABSTRACT

Teaching is an intellectual task of serious proportions, in part because the student and situation are constantly changing. The task of teaching involves, as well as intellectual commitment, an ethical stance with an implied moral contract. A good teacher communicates a deep regard for students' lives and the belief that each student is unique and worthy of reverence. Regard extends to the insistence that students have access to tools with which to negotiate and transform the world. Ernest Gaines' "A Lesson before Dying" illustrates the position of a teacher faced with a resistant student and the self-reflection that comes with struggling to teach well. Teaching and learning are fundamentally relational, but large schools are most often structured in ways that make real relationship impossible. A small schools philosophy is a restructuring strategy that is aimed at the disconnection between teacher and student that often comes with the large school. The call for small schools puts the student at the center of the educational enterprise and places parents and communities at the center of school life. The fundamental message of the teacher is that the student can change his or her life. This task is easier in the small school environment. (Contains five references.) (SLD)

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ED 431 829

SIMPLE JUSTICE: THINKING ABOUT TEACHING AND LEARNING, EQUITY AND THE FIGHT FOR SMALL SCHOOLS

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There is a telling passage in Naguib Mahfouz's Palace of Desire, his epic novel of a traditional family from the old quarter of Cairo swept by the storms of modernism, caught in the conflict of imperialist thrust and nationalist response. Kamal, the teenage son, is invited by his father, Al-Sayyid Ahmad Abd al-Jawad, to tell him which branch of the university he would like to attend. Without hesitation Kamal responds enthusiastically, "I have decided, Papa, God willing and with your approval, of course, to enroll in the Teachers Training College" (Mahfouz, 1991, 48). A cloud descends on his father's head as he contemplates Kamal's words. "Do you know anything about teaching...?" he replies scornfully. "It's a miserable profession which wins respect from no one...It's an occupation... utterly devoid of grandeur or esteem. I'm acquainted with men of distinction... who have flatly refused to allow their daughters to marry a teacher..." (48-49).

But Kamal, with proper deference and respect to his father, of course, perseveres. He has faith in the intrinsic value of learning, in the life of the mind and the pursuit of truth. He sees education linked to progress and change and the hope for a better life. He tentatively suggests that in advanced nations, in Europe for example, teaching is esteemed. Al-Sayyid Ahmad is disgusted: "What does Europe have to do with us? You live in this country. Does it set up statues in honor of teachers? Show me a single sculpture of a teacher." (53).

When Kamal recalls this disheartening exchange to his brother, the older boy seconds their father: "You live here and now, not in...books...Books document strange and supernatural matters... [Y]ou read at times in them a line like...'The teacher is almost like a prophet,' but have you ever encountered a teacher of whom

that was true? Show me one of them deserving the title 'human being', let alone that of 'prophet!'"(57).

What is teaching, after all? How do we construct and then share a conception of the work of a teacher? What is it we actually do? Anyone who has practiced it can attest to the fact that teaching is more than the life of the mind, more than the calm, contemplative pursuit of truth, more, surely, than the steady road to progress. Kamal's vision is certainly naive. A calling to shake the world? Well, hardly. We know that teaching is excruciatingly complex, idiosyncratic, back-breaking, mind-boggling, exhausting, wrenching. And, yet...Kamal is on to something in both of his intuitions. His idealism points -- against the hard and cynical realism of his father as well as much of the rest of the world -- to the possibility of teaching as something more. While he is nursing a dream, his illusion cloaks an unimpeachable fact: teaching at its best requires heart and mind, passion and intellect, intuition, spirit, and judgment. Teaching, again at its best, can be an act of hope and love--love for persons, love for life, and hope for a world that could be, but is not yet. Teaching can be, must be if it is to maintain its moral balance, a gesture toward justice.

These essential, central truths of teaching are often overlooked, usually missed by teachers themselves, almost always by the larger public. My partner of thirty years is a lawyer, and in that time I have often found myself, a bit incongruously, at lawyer parties. The casual chit-chat usually follows a familiar rhythm:

Lawyer: What do you do?

Me: I teach kindergarten (or in another year -- I teach in the juvenile detention center).

Lawyer: (With a frozen, patronizing and pitying look) : Oh...That must be interesting.

Being a teacher turned out to be a conversation stopper, and after a while I tired of the whole predictable script. I developed, then, what I thought was a snappier response. The dialogue now went like this:

Lawyer: What do you do?

Me: I teach kindergarten... It's the most intellectually demanding thing I've ever done.

This always causes a head-snap as the lawyer tries to reconcile three words: teach, kindergarten, intellectual. But the effect is short-lived.

Lawyer (Recomposing the pitying look): That must be very, very interesting.

Reaching for an even grander rejoinder, I try this:

Lawyer: What do you do?

Me: I teach kindergarten, the most intellectually demanding thing I've ever done, and if you ever become bored with making six figures and want to do something truly useful with your life, making a positive difference in children's lives, for example, opening doors and minds and possibilities, you ought to think of a career change... Join me.

I seldom get that far, of course, rarely peak enough interest for another round. The lawyer moves on, the world turns, the words crash to the floor, and I am left feeling a bit like Kamal -- romantic, reprimanded, adrift in an indifferent

world with my pathetic little dreams of teaching. But, like Kamal, I am not entirely wrong, either. So, in what way is teaching intellectual work? How is teaching an ethical enterprise? How is teaching linked to the pursuit of justice? What do we need to change in schools in order to foreground teaching at its best?

A primary challenge to teachers is to see students as a three-dimensional creatures -- people much like themselves -- with hopes, dreams, aspirations, skills, and capacities; with bodies and minds and hearts and spirits; with experiences, histories, a past, a pathway, a future. This knotty, complicated challenge requires patience, curiosity, wonder, awe, humility. It demands sustained focus, intelligent judgment, inquiry and investigation. It requires wide-awakeness, since every judgment is contingent, every view partial, every conclusion tentative. The student is dynamic, alive, in-motion. Nothing is settled, once and for all. No perspective is every perspective, no summary can be entirely authoritative. The student grows and changes -- yesterday's need is forgotten, today's claims are all-encompassing and brand new. This, then, is an intellectual task of serious, massive proportion.

This task involves, as well, an ethical stance, an implied moral contract. The good teacher communicates a deep regard for students' lives, a regard infused with unblinking attention, respect, even awe. An engaged teacher begins with a belief that each student is unique, each the one and only who will ever trod the earth, each worthy of a certain reverence. Regard extends, importantly, to an insistence that students have access to the tools with which to negotiate and transform the world. Love for students just as they are—without any drive or advance toward a future—is false love, enervating and disabling. The teacher must, in good faith,

convince students to reach out, to reinvent, to seize an education fit for the fullest lives they might hope for.

As difficult as these challenges are, they are made tougher and more intense because teachers typically work in institutions of scripted and predictable power, command and control, where the toxic habit of labeling kids by their deficits is the common-sense and the common-place, where the mechanistic model of interchangeable parts is triumphant, and where hierarchy and your predetermined place in it are large, encompassing lessons. In many big schools, simply herding the pack through the cafeteria without incident can seem an accomplishment, a victory. There are simply too many kids and too little time. The language of schools becomes, then, almost exclusively a language of sorting, a language of reduction, a language lacking spark, dynamism, imagination. It is an authoritative and often authoritarian language. TAG, LD, BD, EMH, whatever these point to -- even when glimpsing a chunk of reality -- are reductive and over-determined in schools. The children become opaque and then invisible, the teacher muffled, and then muted. The thoughtful teacher, the caring and fully engaged teacher in this situation, must fight to look beneath and beyond the labels. The ethical teacher must resist.

With eyes wide open and riveted on learners, a further challenge to honest and righteous teachers is to stay wide-awake to the world, to the concentric circles of context in which we live and work. Teachers must know and care about some aspect of our shared life -- our calling after all, is to shepherd and enable the callings of others. Teachers, then, invite students to become somehow more

capable, more thoughtful and powerful in their choices, more engaged in a culture and a civilization, able to participate, to embrace, and, yes, to change all that is before them. How do we warrant that invitation? How do we understand this culture and civilization?

Teachers must always choose -- they must choose how to see the students before them, how, as well, to see the world, what to embrace and what to reject, whether to support or resist this or that directive. In big schools where the insistent illusion that everything has already been settled is heavily promoted, teachers experience a constricted sense of choice, diminished imaginative space, a feeling of powerlessness regarding the basic questions of teaching and the larger purposes of education. But in these places, too, teachers must find ways to resist, to choose for the children, for the future. It is only as teachers choose that the ethical emerges. James Baldwin (1988) says:

> The paradox of education is precisely this--that as one begins to become conscious one begins to examine the society in which he is being educated. The purpose of education, finally, is to create in a person the ability to look at the world for himself, to make his own decisions, to say to himself this is black or this is white, to decide for himself whether there is a God in heaven or not. To ask questions of the universe, and then learn to live with those questions, is the way he achieves his own identity. But no society is really anxious to have that kind of person around. What societies really, ideally, want is a citizenry which will simply obey the rules of society. If a society succeeds in this, that society is about to perish. The obligation of anyone who thinks of himself as responsible is to examine society and try to change it and to fight it--at no matter what risk. This is the only hope society has. This is the only way societies change (4).

Teachers are either the midwives of hope and possibility or the purveyors of determinism and despair. Here, for example, are two quite different teachers at work:

In Beloved, Toni Morrison's searing novel of slavery, freedom, and the complexities of a mother's love, Schoolteacher comes to Sweet Home with his efficient, scientific interest in slaves and makes life unbearable for the people there. Schoolteacher is a disturbing, jarring character for those of us who want to think of teachers as thinking and compassionate people. Schoolteacher is cold, sadistic, brutal. He is all about control and management and maintaining the status quo. He and others like him are significant props in an entire system of dehumanization, oppression, exploitation.

Toward the end of Amir Maalouf's dazzling Samarkand, a historical novel of the life of Omar Khayam and the journey of the Rubiayat, Howard Baskerville, a British school teacher in the city of Tabriz in old Persia at the time of the first democratic revolution, explains an incident in which he was observed weeping in the marketplace: "Crying is not a recipe for anything," he begins, "Nor is it a skill. It is simply a naked, naive and pathetic gesture" (Maalouf, 1994, 234). But, he goes on, crying is nonetheless important. When the people saw him crying they figured that he "had thrown off the sovereign indifference of a foreigner", and at that moment they could come to Baskerville "to tell me confidentially that crying serves no purpose and that Persia does not need any extra mourners and that the best I could do would be to provide the children of Tabriz with an adequate education" (ibid). "If they had not seen me crying", Baskerville concludes, "they would never have let me tell the pupils that this Shah was rotten and that the religious chiefs of Tabriz were hardly any better "(ibid).

Morrison and Maalouf show us that teaching occurs in context, and that pedagogy and technique are not the well-springs of moral choice. School reform and school change, too, are situational—strategy and tactics must always be worked out in specific settings and against particular backgrounds. Teaching becomes ethical practice when it is guided by an unshakable commitment to helping human beings reach the full measure of their humanity, and a willingness to stretch toward a future fit for all -- a place of peace and justice.

In a *Lesson Before Dying*, Ernest Gaines (1993) creates a riveting portrait of a teacher locked in struggle with a resistant student, wrestling as well with his own doubts and fears about himself as a teacher and a person, and straining against the outrages of the segregated South. Grant Wiggins has returned with considerable ambivalence to teach in the plantation school of his childhood. He feels trapped and longs to escape to a place where he might breathe more freely, grow more fully, achieve something special.

The story begins in a courtroom with Grant's elderly Tante Lou and her lifelong friend, Miss Emma, sitting stoic and still near the front. Emma's godson, Jefferson, had been an unwitting participant in a failed liquor store stick up--his two companions and the store owner are dead--and as the sole survivor he is convicted of murder. The public defender, pleading for Jefferson's life, plays to the all-white jury with zeal:

> "Gentlemen of the jury, look at this-this- this boy. I almost said man, but I can't say man...I would call it a boy and a fool. A fool is not aware of right and wrong...
>
> "Do you see a man sitting here?...Look at the shape of the skull, this face as flat as the palm of my hand--look deeply into those eyes. Do you see

> a modicum of intelligence?...A cornered animal to strike quickly out of fear, a trait inherited form his ancestors in the deepest jungle of blackest Africa--yes, yes, that he can do--but to plan?...No, gentlemen, this skull here holds no plans...A thing to hold the handle of a plow, a thing to load your bales of cotton...That is what you see here, but you do not see anything capable of planning a robbery or a murder. He does not even know the size of his clothes or his shoes...Mention the names of Keats, Bryon, Scott, and see whether the eyes will show one moment of recognition. Ask him to describe a rose...Gentlemen of the jury, this man planned a robbery? Oh, pardon me, pardon me, I surely did not mean to insult your intelligence by saying 'man'...
>
> "What justice would there be to take this life? Justice gentlemen? Why I would just as soon put a hog in the electric chair as this." (78)

But it's no good. Jefferson is sentenced to death. He has only a few weeks, perhaps a couple of months, to live. As devastating as the sentence is, it is that last plea from the public defender -- that comparison of Jefferson to a hog -- that cuts most deeply. "Called him a hog," says Miss Emma (12). And she turns to Grant Wiggins: "I don't want them to kill no hog" (12). She wants Grant to visit Jefferson, to teach him.

Wiggins resists, shaken by the challenge and the context: How do you teach someone to be a man? How do you teach someone else things you are uncertain of yourself?

Miss Emma and Tante Lou, along with their preacher, insist that Grant join them in their visits to Jefferson, although the sheriff doesn't want Grant there, "Because I think the only thing you can do is just aggravate him, trying to put something in his head against his will. And I'd rather see a contented hog go to that chair than an aggravated hog" (49). Jefferson himself is wracked with hopelessness; he is uncooperative, resistant: "It don't matter..Nothing don't

matter" (73) he says, as he refuses to eat unless his food is put on the floor, like slops for a hog.

Grant begins by simply visiting Jefferson, being there, speaking sometimes, but mostly just sitting in silence. Witnessing. He brings Jefferson some small things: peanuts and pecans from his students, a small radio, a little notebook and a pencil. He encourages Jefferson to think of questions and write down his thoughts. And sometimes he accompanies Miss Emma, Tante Lou, and the reverend to the dayroom for visits. There he walks with Jefferson and talks to him. This monologue begins with Grant encouraging Jefferson to be kind to his grandmother, to eat some of the gumbo she has brought:

> "I could never be a hero. I teach, but I don't like teaching. I teach because it is the only thing that an educated black man can do in the south today. I don't like it; I hate it...I want to live for myself and for my woman and for nobody else.
>
> "That is not a hero, a hero does for others...I am not that kind of person, but I want you to be. You could give something to her, to me, to those children in the quarter...The white people out there are saying that you don't have it--that you're a hog, not a man. But I know they are wrong. You have the potentials. We all have, no matter who we are...
>
> "I want to show them the difference between what they think you are and what you can be. To them, you're nothing but another nigger--no dignity, no heart, no love for your people. You can prove them wrong. You can do more than I can ever do. I have always done what they wanted me to do, teach reading, writing, and arithmetic. Nothing else--nothing about loving and caring. They never thought we were capable of learning those things. 'Teach these niggers how to print their names and how to figure on their fingers'. And I went along, but hating myself all the time for doing so...
>
> "White people believe that they're better than anyone else on earth--and that's a myth. The last thing they want is to see a black man stand, and think, and show that common humanity that is in us all. It would destroy their myth...

"..all we are, Jefferson, all of us on this earth, [is just] a piece of drifting wood, until we -- each of us, individually -- decide to be something else. I am still that piece of drifting wood...but you can be better. Because we need you to be and want you to be..." (191-193).

After Jefferson is electrocuted, a white deputy sheriff drives out to bring the news to Grant:

"He was the strongest man in that crowded room, Grant Wiggins," Paul said, staring at me and speaking louder than was necessary. "He was, he was...he looked at the preacher and said, 'Tell Nannan I walked.' And straight he walked, Grant Wiggins. Straight he walked"...

"You're one great teacher, Grant Wiggins," he said.

"I'm not great. I'm not even a teacher."

"Why do you say that?"

"You have to believe to be a teacher."

"I saw the transformation, Grant Wiggins," Paul said.

"I didn't do it."

"Who, then?" (253-254)

A Lesson Before Dying is a teacher's tale. While the circumstances here are extreme, the interaction is familiar, recognizable. Every experienced teacher appreciates the irony of teaching what we ourselves neither fully know nor understand. Each of us recognizes the resistant student, the student who refuses to learn. And we can each uncover moments of intense self-reflection, consciousness shifts, and personal growth brought on by our attempts to teach, our listening, our embracing students' lives, our witnessing their voyages.

Many teachers also know what it means to teach against the grain. Against oppression, opposition, and obstinacy. Against a history of evil. Against glib,

common-sense assumptions. When the sheriff compares education to agitation, and the teacher to an organizer "trying to put something in his head against his will," one is reminded of Frederick Douglass' master exploding in anger when he discovers that his wife has taught the young Douglass to read: "It will unfit him to be a slave." One is reminded as well of the charge "outside agitator," hurled by the bosses at the union organizer, or by the college trustees at student radicals. When the sheriff grins at Wiggins for giving Jefferson a journal, because a hog can't write authentic thoughts or experience real human feelings, it is all too familiar. And when Jefferson writes in the journal, "I cry cause you been so good to me Mr. Wiggin and nobody ain't never been that good to me an make me think I'm somebody" (232), we recognize something deeply moving and hopeful about teaching, too.

Education of course lives an excruciating paradox, as Baldwin argues, precisely because of its association with and location in schools. Education is about opening doors, opening minds, opening possibilities. School is too often about sorting and punishing, grading and ranking and certifying. Education is unconditional--it asks nothing in return. School demands obedience and conformity as a precondition to attendance. Education is surprising and unruly and disorderly, while the first and fundamental law of school is to follow orders. Education frees the mind, while schooling bureaucratizes the brain. An educator unleashes the unpredictable, while too many school-teachers start with an unhealthy obsession with classroom management and linear lesson plans.

Working in large schools--where the fundamental truths and demands and possibilities of teaching are obscure and diminished and opaque, and where the powerful ethical core of our efforts is systematically defaced and erased--requires a re-engagement with the larger purposes of teaching. When the drumbeat of our daily lives is all about controlling the crowd, moving the mob, conveying disembodied bits of information to inert things propped at desks before us, students can easily become the enemy, the obstacle. The need, then, to remind ourselves of the meaning of teaching at its best becomes intense, and the desire to fight for ourselves and our students becomes imperative; there is, after all, no basis for education in a democracy outside of a faith in the enduring capacity for growth in ordinary people and a faith that ordinary people--unpredictable, unmanageable, unlikely to fit into any neatly prescribed slots in our increasingly bureaucratized and regimented society--can, if they choose, change the world.

The complexity of the teacher's task is based on its idiosyncratic and improvisational character--as inexact as a person's mind or a human heart, as unique and inventive as a friendship or a love affair, as explosive and unpredictable as a revolution. The teacher's work is about background, environment, setting, surround, position, situation, connection. And, importantly, teaching is at its center about relationship--with the person, with the world.

Seeing the student, seeing the world--this is the beginning: To assume a deep capacity in students, an intelligence (sometimes obscure, sometimes buried) as well as a wide range of hopes, dreams and aspirations; to acknowledge, as well, obstacles to understand and overcome, deficiencies to repair, injustices to correct.

With this as a base, the teacher creates an environment for learning that has multiple entry points for learning and various pathways to success. That environment must be abundant with opportunities to practice justice; to display, foster, embody, expect, demand, nurture, allow, model, and enact inquiry toward moral action. A classroom organized in this way follows a particular rhythm: questions focus on issues or problems (What do we need or want to know? Why is it important? How will we find out?), and on action (Given what we know now, what are we going to do about it?).

Hannah Arendt reminds us that "education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it and by the same token save it from that ruin which, except for renewal, except for the coming of the new and the young, would be inevitable. And education, too, is where we decide whether we love our children enough not to expel them from our world and leave them to their own devices, nor to strike from their hands their chance of undertaking something new, something unforseen by us, but to prepare them in advance for the task of renewing a common world."

Education, clearly is political in the best sense. Schools are necessarily a work in progress, always a conversation unfinished.

In a time when the universe of political discourse is receding, disappearing, teachers need to wonder how to continue to speak the unhearable. How can the unspoken be heard? How does self-censorship perpetuate the silence? The tension between aspiration and possibility is acute, and the question of what is to be done a daily challenge.

Perhaps here is where we can more powerfully engage the question of small schools and the struggle to rescue education from its entanglements and burdens. Bigness in schools was and is deliberate, originally a policy response to the stated needs of the captains of industry, the builders of factories. Big schools are mechanistic and managerial, hierarchical and bureaucratic. Everyone does the same tasks in the same way, like miniaturized factory workers or little soldiers. While all kids are different, in big schools those differences don't make any difference; youngsters and their teachers are treated as if they are interchangeable, even expendable. Big, comprehensive, competitive schools worked for some and failed for many others. Too many students disconnected from learning.

Teaching and learning are fundamentally relational, but large schools are most often structured in ways that make real relationship impossible, eclipsing students' lives and reducing teachers to clerks or assembly-line workers. The business metaphor and the factory model, then, fill up much of the public space; we are bombarded with images of "clients" and "products" and "goods and services" and "efficiency" and "the bottom line." Teaching is dangerously diminished in the "schools as businesses" model--the ethical and intellectual dimensions are destroyed in pursuit of something sleek and gleaming and modern.

While teaching, as I've discussed it here, may seem a romantic dream, an idle vision, in reality the business metaphor and the factory model are proven mistakes based on false promises, failures even in their own terms--drop-out rates, suicides, instances of violence are all higher in big schools. By contrast small schools hold on to kids longer and have significantly higher rates of success,

particularly for African-American, Latino, and immigrant youngsters from high poverty neighborhoods. Why is this so?

When asked, students who drop-out tell us again and again that the main reason they left school is that no one cared if they stayed. An easy response from school people is, again, "Oh, those damn parents." But the kids said "no one," and no one includes us. In fact, large, impersonal structures make it terribly difficult to let most students know whether we care if they stay or not. It's hard even to know their names as they stride past us in fifty minute blurs, thirty kids to a class, 150 kids a day. It's impossible to care much, to embrace them fully, to demand much from them. It's impossible to have much of a relationship. The kids become, then, the crowd, the herd, and much of our teaching bends toward a single goal: to manage the mob. This is the structuring of unethical behavior, the structuring of indifference, the opposite of a calling to the moral dimension. Or, so the drop-outs tell us. And what of those who stay? For many it is different (but nonetheless serious) forms of disconnection, alienation, hopelessness, despair.

Small schools is a restructuring strategy aimed pointedly at this disconnection. Just as bigness was a deliberate policy, smallness is an intentional answer and antidote, a gesture toward the personal, the particular, the integrated, the supportive. Small schools is a counter-metaphor, perhaps, a more hopeful emblem. It points, first, toward students at the center of the educational enterprise. In small schools every student must be known well by some caring adult, and every student must have a realistic possibility of belonging to a community of learners. There is in students a sense of identity, of visibility, of

significance. The message to children and youth is clear: you are a valuable and valued person here; without you this entire enterprise would flounder and fail.

Small schools is, as well, an emblem for teaching as intellectual and ethical work, and for teachers at the center of classroom practice. Teachers, then, are collectively responsible for the content and the conduct of their work--for curriculum, pedagogy, assessment--and, more, for the school lives of a specific group of students. Teachers are not mindless bureaucrats, soul-less clerks, obedient and conforming quisslings. They are, rather, people of courage and initiative, inventors and creators, thinkers and doers. Teachers can be engaged, present, available. And, importantly, they are accountable to the community for their actions and their outcomes. Small schools are places for visible teachers, and perhaps, they are places to build a cohort of crusading teachers.

Small schools is, finally, an emblem for parents and communities as the center of the school's life. Parents are not annoying outsiders to be tolerated, or phony "partners" in a patronizing nod toward fairness. In small schools parents are a gift and an asset, and often decision-makers regarding broad policy and direction.

Small schools must strive to be sites of education, arenas of learning, protected spaces for an intimate encounter with minds and hearts. There must be freedom to teach, freedom to learn. There are rigorous, serious standards and demands, but whereas standards in big schools are typically generated from afar and imposed from above, standard-setting in small schools is part of the real work of teachers, students, and parents. Standards, then, are not imprisoned in the cliché, "What every educated person should know and experience," nor corrupted

by the single-minded focus on sorting winners from losers. Standards can become dynamic, alive, both challenging and nurturing, and, most important, can raise the question of what some kids are privileged to know and experience, while others are being denied access to that knowledge and those experiences. The world presses in. How do some tests and approaches keep some kids out? How does authoritative knowledge deny some kids' experiences? How do some schools and classrooms suppress some curiosity and some desire?

All of this is to argue that we should resist reducing the small schools movement to a definitional conceit, an administrative convenience, or an organizational scheme. Small schools cannot become simply a mechanistic policy option—this opens the door to elitist small schools, to racist small schools, to anything at all. But if justice driven, small schools can point to the kind of schooling worthy of all children—of poor kids and city kids for example. Smallness, then, is an emblematic characteristic of worthiness in schools.

There is the danger that we will become complacent, satisfied with an anemic version of what could be. There is a danger as well that through overuse and misuse our language will undermine our larger purposes, will become clichéd and ridiculous. It is crucial then that we fight to be sure that the solution is not swallowed by the problem. We must embrace and organize every potential ally.

The question of whether a good urban school can be built has been answered all over the country with a resounding "yes." The questions facing us today are more daunting: Can a system of successful schools be built that are accessible to all children? Can big, failing urban schools be transformed into vital

sites of decency and learning with today's teachers and children and families? Can we overcome the structures of failure that predictably impact poor children disproportionately? This is what our work must be about.

Our larger goals must be oriented toward the creation of a system that provides a decent, adequate education to all children. There exists now a patchwork of successful schools and a shambles of failing ones. When mapped against socioeconomic status, school success correlates directly with advantage and disadvantage, with race and class. It is largely the widespread collective anger over school failure linked to endemic racism, privilege and oppression that continues to fuel school reform and the small schools movement. Fighting for change in this critical public arena links to other justice struggles in society, even as it is an immediate effort on behalf of lives of disadvantaged children here and now.

If we take as our goal the education of all children—or even a gesture in that direction—our system is a failure. It is an unjust system. Our impulse to change must build, then, an opposition to this injustice. Some school people say in effect, "If the administration would let me, I'd be a risk-taking teacher." In reality if the system permitted the boldest and best things teachers are capable of, it wouldn't be a risk to do them. We learn to become crusading, freedom-loving, risk-taking teachers by practicing action toward justice. The fight itself—the struggle to create small schools—must be justice work, the fight for inclusion, for example, the struggle for success for all, and the resistance to continuing elitist arrangements. The first thing we learn, then, (and that the students see) is to be fighters for fairness, crusading teachers on behalf of children's lives.

If the danger in large schools is the development of the pathology of the prison—the culture of passivity, complaint, and failure—the danger in small schools is the pathology of the cult with its unhealthy obsession on like-mindedness and the correct line.

We can bring, of course, knowledge, experience, and thoughtfulness to our efforts to change schools. We can know, for example, the importance of attacking structures of failure (size, time) and simultaneously the need to reform the cultures and standards and expectations of failure. We can work to build capacity at all levels in order to be successful in recultured and restructured schools.

Perhaps more important, we must bring our commitments to fairness, equity, and justice—our fundamental commitments—with us into our change efforts. School change is an instance of social change, and it is no less complex or demanding. Every change effort occurs in context and every context bristles with constraints that must be engaged in pursuit of something better, something fairer. Our commitments could include a faith in the ability of ordinary people to shape the solutions to their problems, the importance of rethinking each step as we go, and a willingness to embrace partial measures, small changes, that gesture toward justice.

It is important in our work that we tell no lies and claim no easy victories. There is no easy solution, no one right way to oppose injustice, to mobilize for a better way. We must remain skeptics and agnostics, even as we stir ourselves to act on behalf of what the known demands of us. We can, then, resist becoming credulous in the face of official, authoritative knowledge, and resist as well the

debilitating tendency toward cynicism about the possibility of people to act and change their lives.

Poets, it seems to me, are teachers, too. They remind us of the teacher's task, the teacher's obligations. They enlarge and enliven the space in which we construct our teaching lives. Walt Whitman's advice to poets is relevant to us:

> This is what you shall do:
> Love the earth and sun and the animals, despise riches, give alms to everyone that asks, stand up for the stupid and crazy, devote your income and labor to others, hate tyrants, argue not concerning God, have patience and indulgence toward the people, take off your hat to nothing known or unknown or to any man or number of men, go freely with powerful uneducated persons and with the young and with the mothers of families, re-examine all you have been told at school or church or in any book, dismiss whatever insults your own soul.

Pablo Neruda's "The Poet's Obligation" describes the moral imperative for teachers as well:

> To whoever is not listening to the sea
> this Friday morning, to whoever is cooped up
> in house or office, factory...
> or street or mine or dry prison cell,
> to him I come, and without speaking or looking
> I arrive and open the door of his prison,
> and a vibration starts up, vague and insistent,
> a long rumble of thunder adds itself
> to the weight of the planet and the foam,
> the groaning rivers of the ocean rise,
> the star vibrates quickly in its corona
> and the sea beats, dies, and goes on beating.
>
> So, drawn on by my destiny,
> I ceaselessly must listen to and keep
> the sea's lamenting in my consciousness,
> I must feel the crash of the hard water
> and gather it up in a perpetual cup
> so that, wherever those in prison may be,
> wherever they suffer the sentence of the autumn,
> I may be present with an errant wave.

I move in and out of windows,
and hearing me, eyes may lift themselves,
asking "How can I reach the sea?"
And I will pass to them, saying nothing,
the starry echoes of the wave,
a breaking up of foam and quicksand,
a resulting of salt withdrawing itself,
the gray cry of sea birds on the coast.

So, through me, freedom and the sea
will call in answer to the shrouded heart.

In our own time Adrienne Rich (1979) reminds us of the choices we -- poets, teachers, all of us -- must make. She describes three prototypes of modern middle-class city-dwellers, and we can enlarge that to include any citizen anywhere. One she calls the "paranoiac" -- to arm yourself with mace and triple-lock doors, to never look another citizen in the eye, to live out a vision of the city-as-mugger, dangerous, depraved and unpredictable with, she notes, "the active collaboration of reality." (54).

The second choice she calls the "solipsistic," to create, if you are able, a small fantasy island "where the streets are kept clean and the pushers and nodders invisible," (54) to travel by taxi to dinner or the theater, and to "deplore the state of the rest of the city," -- filled with pollution and violence and foreigners -- "but remain essentially aloof from its causes and effects." (54).

These two prototypes are painfully familiar -- each of us has experiences with a paranoid neighbor or colleague, someone filled with suspicion and alarm; many of us have even felt the perverse, attractive pull of that particular stance. Each of us has experienced, as well, those self-absorbed, narcissistic or indifferent urbanites, the ones with the breezy air and the uncomplicated view of city life -- "I

love Chicago," they say, without a hint of irony or paradox as they rush form cab to health club to carry-out. Theirs is a comfortable and convenient assumption: my small, personal, privileged experience is the equivalent of the entire human experience, and I bear no responsibility to the whole.

Adrienne Rich posits a third possibility, an alternative to these ultimately destructive, delusional choices, something she herself struggles to name -- "a relationship with the city which I can only begin by calling love." (54). This is neither a romantic nor a blind love, but rather a love mixed "with horror and anger...more edged, more costly, more charged with knowledge...Love as one knows it sometimes with a person with whom one is locked in a struggle, energy draining but also energy replenishing, as when one is fighting for life, in oneself or someone else. Here was this damaged, self-destructive organism preying and preyed upon. The streets were rich with human possibility and vicious with human denial." (54).

In order to live fully in the city, Rich concludes, she must above all ally herself with human possibilities, she must not run from, but seek out the webs of connection, weave them thicker and stronger and tighter. She embraces, then, the unmapped, the complex, the imaginable. This may be helpful for those of us who believe in a future for the city and for children and for schools. Can we develop relationships that we might begin by calling love? Can we develop that love -- energy draining and energy replenishing -- in a struggle for human possibility, for life itself? Can we imagine a world that could be otherwise?

Teaching as an ethical enterprise goes beyond presenting what already is; it is teaching toward what ought to be. It is walking with the mothers of children, carrying the sound of the sea, exploring the outer dimensions of love. It is more than moral structures and guidelines; it includes an exposure to and understanding of material realities -- advantages and disadvantages, privileges and oppressions -- as well. Teaching of this kind might stir people to come together as vivid, thoughtful, and, yes, outraged. Students and teachers, then, might find themselves dissatisfied with what had only yesterday seemed the natural order of things. At this point, when consciousness links to conduct and upheaval is in the air, teaching becomes a call to freedom.

The fundamental message of the teacher is this: You can change your life. Whoever you are, wherever you've been, whatever you've done, the teacher invites you to a second chance, another round, perhaps a different conclusion. The teacher posits possibility, openness, and alternative; the teacher points to what could be, but is not yet. The teacher beckons you to change your path, and so the teacher's basic rule is to reach.

To teach consciously for justice and ethical action is teaching that arouses students, engages them in a quest to identify obstacles to their full humanity and the life chances of others, to their freedom, and then to drive, to move against those obstacles. And so the fundamental message of the teacher for ethical action is: You must change the world.

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